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ABSTRACT

This article highlights lessons from the experience of running a workshop that provides basic education. It focuses on the workshop that has been run for four years at Wakefield District College in England to support individuals from the community or students in college courses who need help with basic skills. The flexibility allowed by the workshop in attendance, provision, and learning situation is emphasized. Physical requirements and resources are also discussed. Information is provided on assessing the student's need, providing for student interaction, and keeping student records. The role and responsibility of the tutors are considered in some detail. Attempts to reach students who find it difficult to attend the workshop are also reported. Finally, the workshop is described as the central focus of all the basic education and support work in the area, including support for full- and part-time students as well as the traditional literacy and numeracy instruction. (YLB)

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A WORKSHOP APPROACH TO BASIC SKILLS

Considerable work has been done, in different places, on the development of forms of provision which are more flexible than the set model of a weekly two hour class. With the recent announcement of funding through the Education Support Grant which will be directed to the establishment of Open Learning Centres there will be increased interest in the key issues which arise when organising basic education through a workshop. In this article, Chris Maples, Co-ordinator of the English Workshop and Adult Basic Education at Wakefield District College, highlights lessons from the experience of running a workshop for four years.

In 1982 a report was sent to the Principalship of Wakefield District College highlighting concern for students not achieving their potential on courses. As a result, a work party was set up to consider the provision and teaching of English and Communications courses within college and identify the needs of students in these respects. The work party recommended the setting up of a workshop to support students who need help with basic skills. Basic Education at that time was part of the Adult Education Sector of the College and there were strong links with main stream college work. The role of Basic Education was extended to include the setting up of support work for students on college courses. The workshop was set up in September 1983.

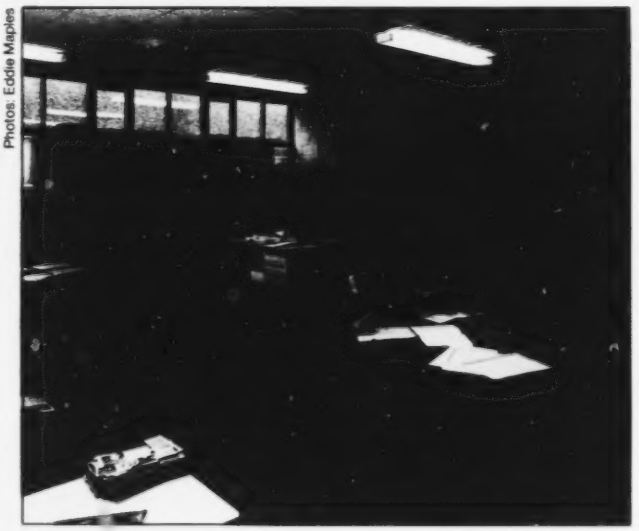
The aim of the workshop is to offer help and support to any individuals from the community or students on college courses whose lack of literacy skills prevent them from achieving their goals.

Why a Workshop?

"A workshop is usually flexible in several dimensions and it may be flexible in different ways for different individuals or groups of learners."
F.E.U. 1987 Learning Workshops

The workshop allows us to respond positively to students' needs. The student no longer has to fit into a pre-determined programme.

Photos: Eddie Maples



The Workshop

Workshop
↓
Flexible Learning Opportunities
↓
Responding to Students' Needs
↓
Access to Education for more Students

The workshop allows flexibility of:

■ attendance ■ provision ■ learning situation

all aspects which contribute to our ability to fulfill the aims of the workshop and Basic education.

Flexibility in attendance means students can negotiate times to suit themselves and their situation, whether on a regular basis as the laundry worker who could only attend 9.00-11.30 three mornings a week; or on an irregular basis like the shift worker who alternates between morning, afternoon and evening attendance; or seasonally as the landscape gardener who does a substantial number of hours in winter knowing he will not have time during the busy summer months.

Flexibility in provision means the workshop can cater for the individual or a variety of groupings i.e. individuals coming together to work on similar topics or small timetabled groups. It is a provision which allows for integration where, for example, special needs or second language groups are working alongside others rather than in isolation.

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Flexibility in the learning situation means students are able to negotiate individual work programmes and work at their own pace. They are able to take an active role in assessing their own needs and progress under the guidance of a tutor. It also means that students with particular interests can work together when relevant.

Physical Requirements

Initially when looking for a space there were certain criteria we felt essential to the success of the workshop. The space had to be: allocated for our exclusive use; central to the main college site and the majority of college students; easily accessible for adults coming in off the street and the disabled in wheelchairs; and large enough for a variety of groupings, teaching methods and resources. This was easier said than done in a college where good teaching space is at a premium. So what have we got? Space in a block just behind the main college building. It is at street level, just off the main street into town which is five minutes away. It is light, airy and (now that we have spread into the room next door) spacious. The carpeted room has light moveable furniture, informal seating area, an office where private interviews can take place and careful placing of filing cabinets form a quiet more private working area. All important elements in establishing an informal, relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

Using computer resources

Resources

The workshop which has become our central resource area, is well resourced with worksheets filed in cabinets, books stored in cupboards, tape recorders, syncrofax, computers with word processing facility, typewriters, project drawers etc. The resources are organised to allow as much access as possible for students' use as well as staff, so worksheets are indexed in ring binders for easy reference and cupboards and cabinets labelled appropriately. Much work needs to be done to develop a more accessible model with the ideal being a resource officer to keep up with supplementary material. Because of the wide range of levels catered for it is important to retain some flexibility to enable students to 'dip in' at the appropriate level.

Survey of 150 Workshop Students to show Length of Time Attending Each Week

18 STUDENTS ATTENDED FOR 1 HOUR
71 STUDENTS ATTENDED FOR 2 HOURS
29 STUDENTS ATTENDED FOR 4 HOURS
9 STUDENTS ATTENDED FOR 4 HOURS
1 STUDENT ATTENDED FOR 6 HOURS
1 STUDENT ATTENDED FOR 7 HOURS
1 STUDENT ATTENDED FOR 8 HOURS
2 STUDENTS ATTENDED FOR 9 HOURS
2 STUDENTS ATTENDED FOR 12 HOURS

The Student and the Workshop

Before a student is introduced to the workshop there will be an informal interview to assess need. Times of attendance will be negotiated with the student. Where a student's time is limited we will try to fit him into that session, but where a student has more time we will take into account:

- times student is available
- how busy workshop is
- the ratio of students to tutors (usually around 8:1)
- volunteer tutor support available
- range of ability of students
- particular qualities/specialism of staff on duty
- number of different tutors students will be working with

It is important to balance all these factors carefully to allow successful integration of all types and levels of students. It is also important to explain the basic philosophy and how the workshop 'works' to new students, to help to ease them into what is for many a very different way of learning.

All students attending the workshop are given a link tutor who will be responsible for negotiating the work programme with the student and determining appropriate strategies and areas of work. This will be done in liaison with the other tutors the student comes into contact with. In doing this we hope the programme of work will be integrated rather than each tutor working in isolation. This works in a number of ways; the link tutor may choose to prepare the work for all sessions the student attends with the other tutors overseeing it; or the tutors concerned may each decide to cover different areas of work; or they may work together to integrate the programme of work between them.

There is always the danger that some students working in the workshop and perhaps only communicating with the tutor on duty could become isolated. We feel the benefits of contact and interaction with other students are too great to be dismissed. Therefore students are encouraged to interact by: having mutual coffee breaks; introducing new students to others of similar age/interest; encouraging mutual help, and opportunities for students with similar interests and difficulties to work together at times. In this way informal groupings naturally arise and there is a 'group' feel about workshop sessions. We have also set up two daytime workshop groups to cater for students who need group interaction in addition to individualised workshop work.

Each student has a personal folder which, when not in use is kept in a file in the workshop, but accessible to the student at any time. The file contains the student's work plan which can be built on when appropriate, a sheet for student and tutor to record sessionally work done, progress made and any forward planning, as well as examples of work. Students are expected to be responsible for any other work. Periodically, to encourage evaluation of progress over a period of time (and to prevent files becoming overloaded with sessional record sheets) a resumé is made of the information contained within the record sheets. The student fully participates in this process with the help and guidance of the tutor. The student's personal folder is also a useful communication tool for the link tutor.

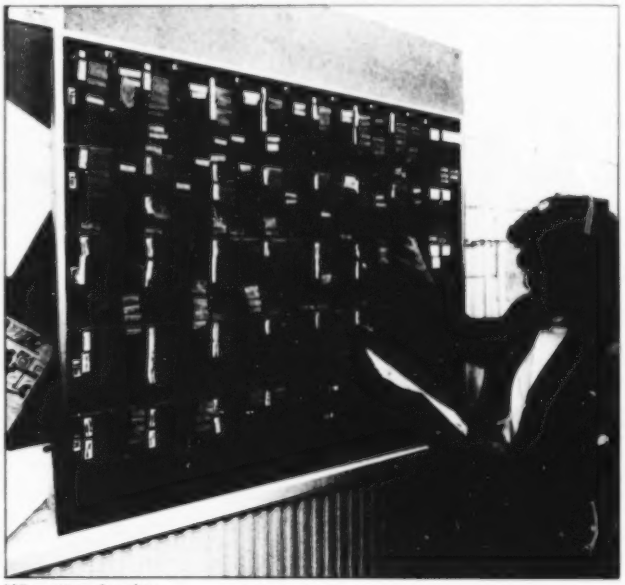
Tutors and the Workshop

Each workshop session (hour) is staffed by one tutor, and other groups who use the workshop space have a tutor timetabled to work with the group. If any sessions are particularly busy the session is doubled staffed (Wednesday's always seem the busiest).

USE OF DAYTIME WORKSHOP SPACE ON TUESDAYS
Showing number of students attending — volunteer tutors in brackets

	9.15-10.15	11.15-12.15	1.15-2.15	3.15-4.15
Workshop	7 9 (2)	6 (2) 8 (3)	8 (3) 7 (2)	5 (1)
Special Needs Group		7 (3) 7 (3)		
Wider Opportunities for Women	10	10		
English as a Second Language		11 (3) 11 (3)		
Confident English R.S.A. C.C.E		10	10	

Staffing can be a problem because numbers fluctuate enormously from week to week, this means we have to keep a constant check on numbers attending and try and keep a balance between the sessions once the pattern of staffing is established for the academic year.



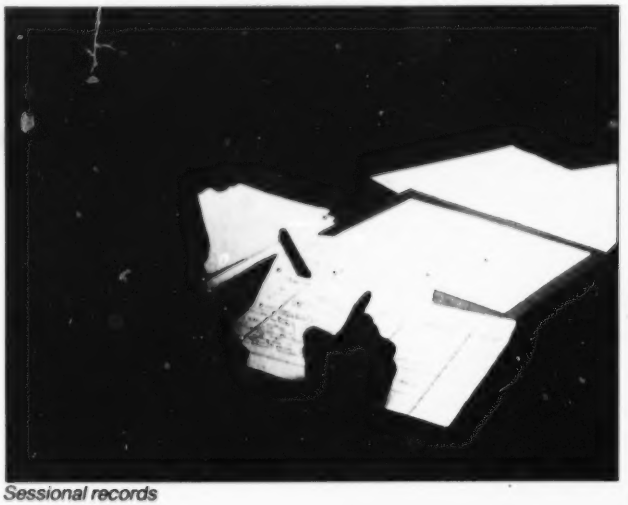
Who attends when . . .

For each hour the workshop is open we keep a register of students attending to enable us to keep a check on numbers and collate statistics (an office computer is on its way which should make the task a little easier). Because of the difficulty of keeping a picture of the spread of students, tutors, volunteer tutors and groups using the workshop we have a board in the office which gives us at a glance information in this respect. The difficulty is finding the time to keep it up to date! The tutor on duty in the workshop has the responsibility for their link students including negotiating the work programme and assessing the work they have covered and the progress they have made. The tutor is also responsible for preparation and checking of work of other students attending their session, and supporting any volunter tutors as well as helping any 'drop in' student who is wanting immediate help.

This is extremely demanding work, the flexibility of the situation demands the same amount of flexibility from the tutor, who may be helping a student at a very basic level one minute and an 'A' Level student wanting help with essay writing technique the next and students of all levels in between, within the same session. Tutors have to be able to sensitively divide their time between all individuals while making sure nobody feels neglected, which can be very difficult where one student is particularly demanding or where a student is not yet initiated into the workshop way of working. Volunteers are invaluable in this situation, many adapting extremely well to workshop techniques and becoming very effective 'floaters'.

Resources

Tutors have to be very familiar with the resources in order to quickly provide relevant materials for the students as they come in to start work or finish a piece of work. Keeping up with sessional records can be difficult in this situation where there is no defined beginning and end of session — students are coming and going all the time. With a definite timetabled session it is much easier when you can wind down with the routine of completing record/progress sheets. However it is a situation which relies heavily on good record keeping to ensure continuity of work, particularly where a student is meeting more than one tutor. For students who have been involved with the process of filling in sessional record sheets it should become part of the routine of finishing and where possible they can fill in the sheet themselves if the tutor is busy with another student.



Sessional records

Tutors have to be able to work openly alongside other members of staff. At times in the workshop there may be as many as four members of staff working. Within some sessions the definition between the groups has become blurred and the members of staff are team teaching for part of the session. We believe the openness of the staff contributes to the welcoming atmosphere of the workshop and encourages students to be less introvert about their

difficulties. Tutors who are not familiar with this approach can feel quite threatened by it, especially if they are used to a syllabus and closed classroom door. The best way to help tutors to come to terms with workshop strategies is for them to work alongside an experienced member of staff.

The Workshop and Support For Mainstream Students

In the early stages the workshop was mainly seen by college as a place where students would come and get the help they need whether a single visit was needed or regular visits over a long period. This works very well for some students, but there are students who for a number of reasons find it difficult to attend the workshop. They may:

- have a very full timetable
- be in an annex away from main college site
- be too embarassed
- lack the motivation

In order to cater for these students there has been a move for experienced workshop tutors to go into other sectors to work alongside members of staff in helping them to support students in a timetabled session. We have become increasingly aware that no matter how well resourced and staffed the unit is we will never be able to give some students all the time they need to significantly improve their skills. It seems important therefore that students get as much support as possible from the vocational tutors who are working with them for a large proportion of the time they are in college. Students are much more likely to respond and overcome their difficulties if there is a team effort from all members of staff coming into contact with them. It is also a fact that no matter how informal and welcoming we are and how much we are seen to be an important part of college provision we never escape the 'remedial' label in the eyes of many of the students. Meeting the students on home ground is one way of overcoming this.

The Workshop as a Focus for A.B.E.

The workshop has become much more than a place where people come to improve their basic skills, it has become the central focus of all the Basic Education and support work in our area, including support for full and part-time students as well as the traditional literacy and numeracy provision.

Even though tutors may be working in isolation in an outcentre they are able to meet other staff in the workshop, both formally and informally which helps promote the feeling of being part of a team able to exchange ideas and gain support from each other. They are also able to take advantage of the workshop as a central resource.

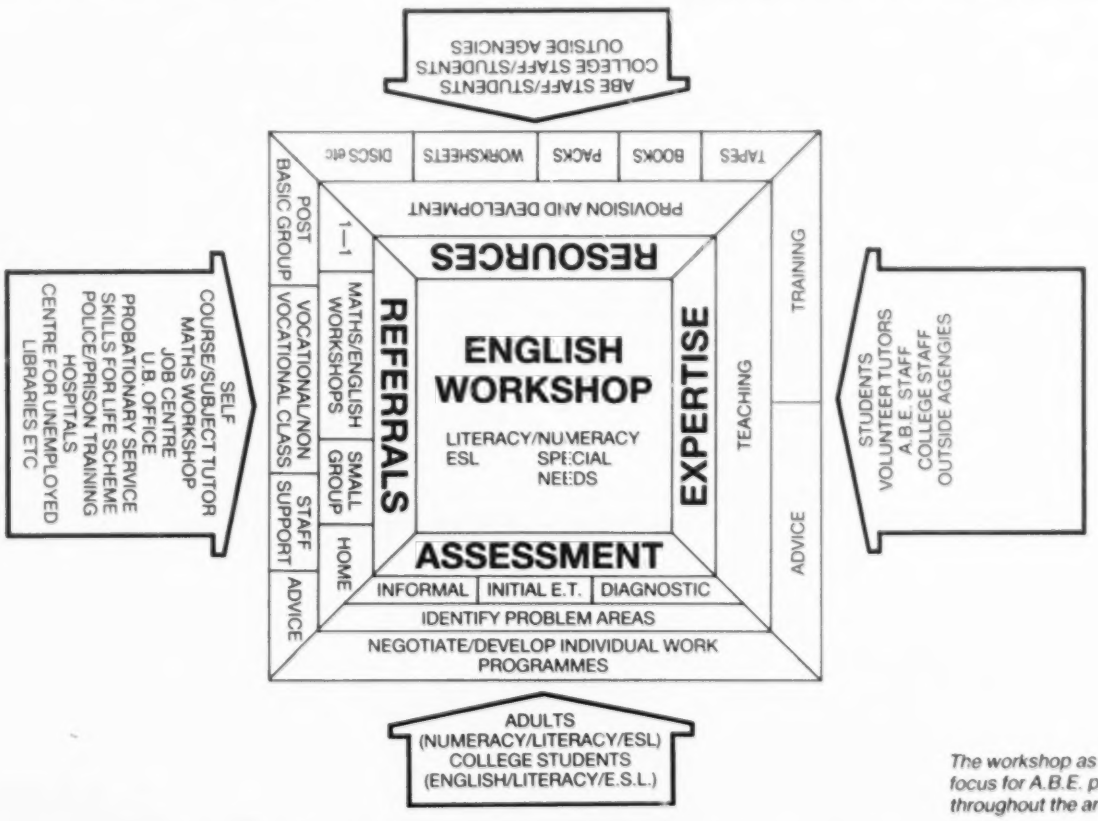
It is a place where lecturers from other sectors within college can come for advice and resources.

Students from outcentres are able to come into the workshop occasionally to use the more extensive resources than are available in their centre e.g. groups come in to use the computers and word processors.

Moving on to the workshop provision from an outcentre can be an important move for students towards other college provision, made so much easier because of our close proximity to the main college building and our involvement with mainstream college work.

The workshop has added a complete new dimension to our Basic Education provision. Not only has it given us the opportunity to respond to students' needs in a way that was impossible in pre-workshop days, but it has forced us to rethink approaches and confront a number of issues that have arisen as the workshop has developed. This we have had to do as a team in order to come up with a philosophy and workable model that the tutors and students feel comfortable with.

We are all aware that we have not reached the perfect model, that there are issues that need more consideration and that new issues will arise if we want to remain as flexible and open as we are today; but it is this very openness and flexibility which encourages the open-minded attitudes that will allow us to respond positively to any developments and constraints that we face in the future.



The workshop as a central focus for A.B.E. provision throughout the area.

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